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Literary Criticism

The following three papers by Jay Cox, Joan Thompson and James R. Saucerman were presented at the 24th annual meeting of The Western Literature Association, *hosted by N.I.C. (North Idaho College) at Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, October 11-14, 1989, and are representative of some of the doctoral research and writing in Native Literature.*

Dangerous Definitions: Female Tricksters in Contemporary Native American Literature

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I.

Coyote is going along, dancing on the rim of the world, truckin' down the highway, ambling through the desert, the forest, the prairie. Whether the trickster is rabbit, raven, old man or coyote, he/she has a popularity that runs deeper than cartoons, t-shirts, or postcards. As Babcock and Cox conceptualize trickster,1 "he/she knows no bounds, lives in a world before/beyond classification, and is always in motion. Timeless, universal, and indestructible, this 'ragged four-legged verb' as Patricia Clark-Smith calls coyote, eludes and disrupts all orders of things, including the analytic categories of academics."[2] The problem of defining trickster is not that his/her image is unreadable, but that trickster represents a plurality that cannot be classified in conventional terms. Critics have attempted to apply a variety of methods and theories in order to define him/her. Babcock and Cox survey the various critical views and methodologies applied to trickster. For Jung and Jungians, trickster is "'an archetypal structure of extreme antiquity,' from Fruedian perspective as the personification of the id or life principle, and in Navaho worldview as a 'symbol of that chaotic everything.'"[3] For Victor Turner, trickster is "betwixt and between," in a "liminal" position which accommodates his/her ability to transgress boundaries.[4] As many scholars have noted, Mary Douglas' ideas of pollution and taboo in her book, *Purity and Danger*, shed interesting light on trickster. "The function of such anomalous, 'dirty' characters as trickster is not simply mediation between binary oppositions, but is reflexive, provoking a recognition of 'the fictive, man-made, arbitrary' cultural categories that humans create for taboo subjects, figures, ideas, etc."[5] Elsewhere Babcock-Abrahams examines these theories of order and disorder in her 1975 article on trickster. In particular, she explores and analyzes trickster's cross-dressing, social and sexual trangression, sex change, and movement between isolation and community, low to high social status and back again. She labels trickster a "negation offering possibility."[6] However, most scholars ignore the possibility that trickster can be female as well as male; or like Franchot Ballinger, separate the female trickster stories from "the predominant male tricksters," effectively marginalizing and devaluing them.[7]

Perhaps Gerald Vizenor, academic storyteller and trickster extraordinaire, has imagined trickster more completely, more ambiguously than any other scholar. For Vizenor, trickster's newest battleground is academe and trickster is a word warrior against colonization, popularization, and isolation from a collective tribal identity.[8] The game then becomes a sort of "cultural striptease," a la Roland Barthes[9] wherein trickster and his/her story promises to reveal everything, where the encoding is the purpose, not the unveiling. Or on the other hand, the game might reveal everything all at once, without explanation, qualification, or mediation. But, as Vizenor asserts, trickster *is* narrative, a sign in a lan-

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guage game,[10] where the rules can be made up as you go along, the playing everything and nothing, and where results don't matter. Trickster is not a structural binary. Therefore, as Vizenor may be suggesting, because of the play of language, trickster might cavort and scamper quite meaninglessly, again demonstrating the power to discombobulate observers by restructing him/herself while we watch.

So critics have argued back and forth to define trickster: a few drawing too exclusive a line; some using native and non-native metaphors;11 some falling into the morass of the academic imperative; all trying to define the undefinable. However, Native Americans have presented trickster in the past, and however scholars might choose to define those renders, 500 years of cultural contact have caused trickster to submerge and emerge in new ways. The rest of this paper will focus on trickster's reemergence in contemporary Native American literature, particularly as a female character.

II.

Before I turn to contemporary literary trickster figures, one must understand that "telling stories is...coyote's *modus vivendi*. Not surprisingly, therefore, today's Native American storyteller frequently presents him/herself in the ratty fur of coyote."[12] Barre Toelken asked the Navaho Yellowman about this connection between storytellers, storytelling and trickster; he replied, "If [Coyote] did not do all those things, then those things would not be possible in the world," for "through the stories everything is made possible."[13] Larry Evers, director of the *Words and Place* series, which has collected numerous storytelling sessions on videotape, speculates that perhaps the reason there are so many recorded coyote and clown stories is because they are the most fun to tell, and because they call attention to the cultural contact of these storytelling sessions. The merging of verbal art and tribal traditions with the form of Anglo text is contemporary Native American literature--a liminal literary space where cultures and genres collide, and a space that trickster might exploit with all his/her subversion and inversion.

The Right Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah is trickster's first "modern" incarnation. He appears in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. In that novel, as Evers argues, Abel must find a cure to the sickness that stems from his mixed heritage and the spiritual rupture that manifests itself in inarticulateness. The words are given to him in the sermon "Way to Rainy Mountain," by Tosamah, "who delivers them in his great dog voice with all the ambiguity and clowning for which trickster is well-known."[14] Putting the words from his popular book *Way to Rainy Mountain* into Abel's healing process through the voice of Tosamah, Momaday identifies himself as trickster and novelist; or more precisely, trickster-novelist. In another book, *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko also demonstrates -- through Betonie -- "trickster's ability as accomplished scavenger and bricoleur to use benefically what appears to be the waste of human cultural existence."[15] However, trickster is not bound to appear as medicine man or quasi- charlatan, nor is trickster bound by maleness.

III.

The sexual coyotes and sheep has often lead us scholars astray from the full potentiality of trickster.16 Denying coyote's erotic and scatological aspects is to deny most of the fun of coyote stories. Expurgated collections do exist for whatever reason. But to deny coyote a calling as cultural role-model, or creator-spirit denies the obvious power of trickster in most tribal traditions. As Karl Luckert explains, "coyote is too much for academic systems, too lively, too restless to submit to analytic scalpels."[17] Luckert suggests a larger name for coyote, one which would identify coyote on the multiple levels: "Coyote is Excrement-corpse-fool-gambler-imitator-trickster-witch-hero-savior-god."[18] More importantly, *to deny trickster the potential to be* female *does not limit* trickster's *capacity for sexual vagary; such denial only demonstrates the gullibility of academic classification of the unclassifiable*. Female coyotes are not unknown in either traditional or contemporary Native American literatures. "That trickster is generically male and characterized by exaggerated phallicism may be the result of male bias in the collection and interpretation of trickster tales compounded by the Anglo bias of identifying Indian women with stability."[19] Even so, Franz Boas' *Keresan Texts* has several Keresan Coyote Girl stories (in addition to the tales of Kochininako, who is an accomplished hunter, tribal leader, and fertility figure); Ekkehart Malotki and Michael Lomatuway'ma have edited and translated a number of Hopi stories which show a female Coyote "going along," specifically "Coyote and the Witches" and "Coyote and the Bird Girls."

In contemporary writing, female trick-

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sters function both within the framework of the community and the liminal space down by the river, in the forest, at lakeside. Silko's "Yellow Women" stories (in *Storyteller*) are based on Kochininako, the traditional Keresan figure "whose power to cross the boundary between the mountains and the pueblo, and return with gifts--twins, corn, summer- -is very similar to the machinations of trickster, who operates boldly on the margin and (sometimes discretely) within the community."[20] In "Yellow Woman" and "Storytelling," a modern Kochininako goes down to the river, which is a liminal space both in the story and in Silko's personal imagination.[21] There she meets a cattle rustler, and returns to the community and her husband's home much later, bearing stories and twin baby boys. In *Ceremony*, the Night Swan performs her magic in the dangerous and liminal sexual power-chamber above the store. Rumors have it that she killed a man by "dancing" him to death; certainly traditional male tricksters share this kind of sexual energy. The Night Swan is also identified with Ts'eh, the younger woman who leads Tayo out of his spiritual abyss. Silko herself can be seen acting as a storyteller/coyote, gossiping/storytelling on the porch in the *Words and Place* film, "Running On the Edge of the Rainbow."

Other female tricksters are shaking things up in Louise Erdrich's fiction. Fleur, in *Tracks*, can be identified as a Yellow Woman-type: a woman who retreats to the margins of the lake in order to make love to whomever she wants, raise her child, Lulu, as she pleases, and make a stand against the lumber company that threatens tribal unity. She is guided and guarded by an old man named Nanapush (who not so coincidentally is the traditional Chippewa trickster). Like Silko's Yellow Woman, Fleur is drawn to go against the grain of the community, and yet provides the community with a child who will later become a fertile important figure herself in *Love Medicine*. June Kashpaw is the "chaotic everything" to all the characters in that novel. Much more than a unifying thread, June's death in the first chapter does little to impede her spirit from going along throughout the novel. Momaday's latest novel, *The Ancient Child*, finds a little trickster in the woman Grey, who Set mistakes for a boy at first glance.[22] In fact, both Grey and Locke Setman, also called Loki (the Norse trickster), feel the influence of the Bear within their spirits. This kinship palpably suggests that they are twins, male and female embodiments of trickster, and perhaps of Momaday, the trickster-novelist himself.[23]

IV.

Novels are not the only territory coyote roams. The poetry of Native American writers and recent film productions incorporate the spirit and sometimes the figure of trickster. To name just a few, Joy Harjo's "She Had Some Horses," powerfully demonstrates trickster's plural powers and guises, her grit and vulnerability, in the shape of horses or woman. Nia Francisco's poem, "'Snake Juice' Talk," shows a Navajo Lady Coyote "talking loud" about running for Navajo tribal office, with the hope of doing it better than the men. Other Native women poets, such as Nora Naranjo-Morse, Nila NorthSun, and Louise Erdrich (especially in "The Lady in the Pink Mustang" in *Jacklight*), identify with trickster in an effort to weave, reweave, and strengthen ties to tribal traditions that are centuries old. Recent films show the spirit of trickster as well. *Pow Wow Highway* (1988) depicts a young Anglo woman called Rabbit, helping break the protagonists out of jail. Her name and "game-for- anything" attitude show some degree of trickster's winning personality.[24] The unfinished film *Stolen Rain*, based on Silko's "Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs" in *Storyteller*, portrays a modern Kochininako standing by the juke box in a bar, practicing sexual intrigue on the dancers.

All of these male and female tricksters, Betonie, Yellow Woman, Ts'eh, the Night Swan, Horse Woman, and Lady Coyote have access to liminal space, such as the water's edge, the bedroom, the front porch, and the barstool, the same as trickster. The most remarkable feature of Coyote is this ability to move freely from the margin to the center of the community, and is perhaps female trickster's best advantage. However, the oral tales in which Coyote Woman figures show no substantial difference between her powers and abilities and those of Coyote Man's. Therefore, instead of concluding that trickster sometimes shares *his*[i of] space with females, as most scholars are inclined to do, "why not eliminate the bias of gender, and draw wider parameters for definition", accepting that trickster is easily female or male? The point is that gender has never been a determining factor for trickster. "Dangerous Definitions" is my title. In

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the Mary Douglas sense of dirt, taboo, and danger, my linking both categories of "danger"---women and tricksters, in male-Anglo dominated scholarly discourse--might seem even too potent, too subversive a trick; and therefore a subject male scholars might prefer to separate, marginalize, and ignore. Yet such an "inversion" inverts only Anglo notions of trickster, and exemplifies Vizenor's language game- -"trickster is a communal sign, a comic holotrope and a discourse; not a real person or a tragic metaphor in an isolated monologue."[25] Trickster is not a pawn in a power game between sexes, between cultures; nor is trickster a commodity to be simply silkscreened, lithographed, or cut from plywood.[26] So then, while one might dismiss a female as a trickster simply because of gender, the overlap of women and tricksters in Native American writing provides too much evidence to ignore *her* existence as trickster.

V.

Finding a trickster on every page, behind every tree, at every river bank, might seem to be a literary obsession. Then again, it might begin a journey towards redefining Native American literature, oral and written; American literature, native and non-native, canonical and marginal, male and female. In fact, looking for trickster in unlikely places might just produce the kind of chaotic disordering so characteristic of trickster who eludes, disrupts, and defies classifications of any kind. Messing around, on and with boundaries is risky, daring and delicate business. But certainly trickster's energy is at the heart of reclassifications of genres, definitions of canons, restructuring of curriculums, and this work does certainly not exclude women. In fact, women have been quietly ordering and reordering things for quite some time without any credit. Recognizing that coyote can be female as well as animal, human, superhuman will perhaps placate that female "chaotic everything" who will not want to go unnoticed for too long.

Notes

[1]This article is heavily indebted to my collaboration with Barbara Babcock on "The Native American Trickster," forthcoming in the Dictionary of Native American Literature. Quotations from that entry will be indicated by "B & C" or by a double notation, both the source and "qtd. in B & C." I am grateful to Professor Babcock for perhaps recognizing the trickster within me that would want to tackle so ambiguous and ambitious a subject. A version of this paper was presented at the Western Literature Association's Annual Meeting in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, October 13, 1989.

[2]Clark-Smith 1983, 192; qtd. in B & C.

[3]Jung 200; Roheim 193; Toelken 1969, 231; qtd. in B & C.

[4]Turner 1968, 576; qtd. in B & C.

[5]Douglas 200; see also Babcock-Abrahams, "Frogs,'" qtd. in B & C.

[6]Babcock-Abrahams, "Trickster" 182; qtd. in B & C.

[7]Ballinger, 28n. Perhaps if Ballinger had not separated female from male, then he would notice female trickster's facility to move from a place of social acceptance (child-nurturer) to the margin (hunter, adulterer) and back again, without raising the suspicions he expresses for the notion of "liminality."

[8]Vizenor, 192-3.

[9]B & C. For Barthes' complete description of striptease, see "Striptease" in Mythologies (trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 84-87.

[10]Vizenor, 197; qtd. in B & C.

[11]Ballinger's suggestion that our metaphors be tabled- -"tabling the usual metaphors for a time and focusing on narrative facts"--merely privileges one methodology over another, rather than clearing away "the unnecessary layers of paradox to an already paradoxical figure" (17).

[12]B & C, emphasis added.

[13]Toelken 1969, 221; qtd. in B & C.

[14]B & C.

[15]B & C.

[16]The terms "sexual coyote" and "hormonal sheep" were coined by my freshmen composition class who, upon reading these poems and stories, instantly recognized trickster behavior--the limited space of Lover's Lane, the river, the drag, the bushes; and the need to tell a good story to get out of trouble.

[17]Haile 7.

[18]Haile 7.

[19]B & C.

[20]B & C.

[21]See Running on the Edge of the Rainbow in which Silko comments that the Marmons, a mixed heritage family, have always lived down by the river.

[22]Momaday 1989, 66ff.

[23]This perceptive idea was suggested to me by Professor Louis Owens in discussion following my presentation at WLA, October 1989.

[24]The general presence of trickster in that film moves the protagonists from home to Pine Ridge to Santa Fe, and encourages a mixed-blood child to ask, "Mom, what tribe am I?"

[25]Vizenor, 196.

[26]My research in progress considers the visual representations of Coyote on merchandise, the art of Fonseca, and Bryer, and film.

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